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UNCLAS FRANKFURT 002147

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SPD Bucks Trend, Wins Local Races in Hesse

SENSITIVE

Sensitive but unclassified; not for Internet distribution.

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Social Democratic Party (SPD) candidates have won a series of off-cycle election victories in formerly Christian Democratic (CDU) governed areas in Hesse -- most recently in Kassel (Hesse's third largest city) -- signaling a competitive battle for communal elections in early 2006. Observers view the SPD's victory over an 11-year incumbent in Kassel as a sign of the CDU state government's difficulties communicating with local voters. The SPD is optimistic about its prospects in other mayoral races this year. State-wide communal elections in early 2006 will be an important test of Minister-President Roland Koch's popularity in the lead-up to national elections later next year. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) On February 27, SPD candidate Bertram Hilgen (former aide to Federal FinMin Hans Eichel) unseated long-time incumbent Lord Mayor Georg Lewandowski (CDU) in Kassel by a convincing margin of 54 to 46 percent. This SPD victory -- in the year's most important election in Hesse -- is also noteworthy because Kassel was one of the few major cities in Germany governed by a CDU-Green coalition. In the run-off, Green voters overwhelmingly supported Hilgen (a critic of the CDU-Green coalition), prompting SPD and FDP (Free Democratic) politicians to declare the end of the "black-green era" in the city.

3. (U) The SPD victory in Kassel follows a series of recent SPD victories in CDU-controlled cities, including Hanau (early 2004) and Marburg (late 2004). The SPD has also won county races in CDU rural strongholds (most recently on March 6 outside Frankfurt). The SPD now holds six of 12 lord mayorships and two thirds of local mayoral positions; it also now controls the majority of Hesse's counties.

4. (U) Political analysts at the University of Marburg told a consulate representative that CDU incumbents have lost recently due to (1) the party's disconnect with local issues, (2) successful voter-mobilization by SPD candidates, and (3) the CDU's absolute majority at the state level which makes it a "lightning-rod" for criticism. Sources in the state CDU office opined that recent election defeats are a setback for state-wide communal elections next year and for M-P Koch's ambition to make the state CDU a hegemonic "Party of Hesse" along the lines of Bavaria's Christian Social Union (CSU). The Hesse FDP (in opposition since 2003) portrays a CDU "disconnect with voters" that "starts at the top in Wiesbaden and runs down into small villages".

5. (SBU) COMMENT: After his convincing victory in 2003 state elections, Minister-President Koch said the Hesse CDU would take the battle to the local level and transform the party into a dominating force like the CSU in Bavaria. The SPD's local victories, while not overwhelming, are a setback for the CDU and show that SPD candidates are still able to mobilize voters on local issues despite the party's weakness at the state and national levels. Communal elections in Hesse (due before April 2006) will be the most important test of Koch's popularity in advance of national elections later next year. Recent losses mean that Koch will have to make up more ground in the coming months and may act as a temporary brake on national ambitions. END COMMENT.

BODDE